

# The New York City Draft Riots of 1863

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When the Amazon docked at the New York Harbor, July 19, 1863, eight hundred Latter-day Saints, who were on board, soon learned that New York City had just experienced one of the largest and deadliest weeklong riots in the history of the United States. The Saints, feeling that the hand of Providence had delivered them, were grateful to have missed the riots by just a couple of days. The following is an account of how these riots came about:

During the summer of 1863, New York City was a tinder box set to explode at any moment. The living conditions for many of the cities poorest residents were deplorable. They lived in overcrowded tenements with the largest disease and crime rate in the western world. This, coupled with a 43 percent increase in inflation since the start of the war in 1860 and wages increased by only 12 percent, caused despair for many. As a result, the standard of living for the cities poorest immigrant groups, the largest being the Irish, was drastically reduced.

The passage of the Conscription Act in April of 1863 by Congress also helped to create tension among the people of the working class. It called for all men between the ages of 20-45 to be enrolled into two classes. The first class was made up of single men from 20-45 years old and married men from 20-35 years old. The second group would only be called if the entire first group were drafted or were exempt from military service. A potential soldier could be exempt for a variety of reasons such as mental or physical disability, the sole supporter of orphaned children, or of a widowed or elderly parent. A draftee could also be exempt from service by finding a substitute or paying a \$300 commutation fee. This made many poor and working class people feel it was "...a poor man's fight but a rich man's war..."

The unfairness of the draft, coupled with resentment against the growing Black population, only added to the growing

bitterness. The Black population worked for low wages, even lower wages than the larger immigrant population. Hostility grew not only against the Black community but also against the wealthy upper class who could afford to pay for a substitute either physically or financially.

On July 11, 1863, the first Federal draft was held in lower Manhattan in the Ninth District Draft Office, which was set up at Third Avenue and 46th Street. The first draft went relatively peacefully. The crowd that did gather outside, grumbled, shouted, and cursed but did not interfere in the draft. On that day 1,236 names had been called. The remainder of the 236 names would be selected on Monday.

July 12, 1863, was a rest day for many laborers since it was Sunday. Time off from work, coupled with bitter frustrations over the continuation of the draft, gave citizens the time to mull over Saturday's events. It also gave them time to plan their method of striking back. The brainstorming for their attacks would occur at the local saloons and other immigrant meeting places, such as the front steps, on a hot July day. It was here that a combination of liquor and anger made for an unhealthy and embittered clash between the working classes of New York City and all who were seen as the opposition.

The New York City Draft Riots of 1863 began in the early hours of Monday, July 13th. The riot began four hours before the Ninth District draft was set to commence, which was to be at 10:30 that morning. It began when employees of the city's railroads, machine shops, shipyards, iron foundry workers, laborers from uptown contractors, and "...hundreds of others employed in building and street improvement" gathered. Together, these rioters began their march to the Ninth District Draft Office. On their way, they urged other common workers to leave their factories and construction sites to join them on their crusade against the draft.

Along the way, the rioters began their devastation to the city. They tore down telegraph lines and poles. Some stores were looted for broadaxes. Irish women used crowbars to rip up railroad tracks on Fourth Avenue. They soon joined the group of rioters.

The workers all met in a vacant lot just east of Central Park for a meeting before they proceeded to the draft office. It was here that the mob of rioters grew and united with others who assembled from the different parts of the city. This gathering is believed to have happened by accident rather than some planned occurrence.

The rioters marched to the Ninth District Draft Office. It was here that members of the Black Joke's Engine Company set fire to the draft office. Members of the fire departments were traditionally exempt from military service. They wanted this privilege to be extended to the Federal draft as well. This was, however, not the case since the captain of the BJEC was called as a draftee. Members of the BJEC resolved to stop the draft due to its perceived unfair conditions. A pistol shot was fired among the crowd, and members of the BJEC stormed through the doors, smashed the draft wheel, and set the draft office on fire. The riot, however, did not stop with the burning of the draft office.

The mob was beginning to grow in number. The group of rioters encompassed men, women, and children. They stopped traffic, closed shops, and left their work place just to join the crowd. One spectator believed that she witnessed more than 12,000 people filling the streets of New York City.

It was clear from the early hours of Monday that there was a division among the rioters, themselves, as to what was the true goal of the riot. A committee from the East Side of Manhattan believed the goal of the riot was strictly limited to demonstrating against the draft. This view was not the case for many that came out that day and on the morning of the first day.

The afternoon of Monday, July 13th, saw the focus of riots taking an entirely new and different direction. The draft was already suspended by 11:30 a.m. The rioters were attacking both federal and municipal government property, private property, and assaulting members of the Black population. The looting of stores became the norm rather than the exception. The angry mob's object was to destroy any and all remnants of the draft in New York City.

The rioters' sentiments changed by the hours and varied greatly throughout the day. By five o'clock, rioters began to attack the homes of people suspected of harboring police. They attacked the police officers in the streets. One of the attacked officers was the Superintendent of the Police, John A. Kennedy. He was beaten beyond recognition and dragged through the mud. Men of well-dressed stature and the homes of the wealthy Republican were also under attack. Members of the Republican Party were viewed as being responsible for the Federal draft, as well as the impoverished conditions of the immigrants.

Women rioters played a key role in purging the city of its Republican elements. The women vowed "...vengeance on enrolling officers when they first called to procure the names for the draft."

The caliber of many individuals in the crowd was changing yet again. By late Monday, the rioters were beginning to abandon the violence and assist police and law enforcement officials. The fire department was just one example of people who protested the draft. However, by late Monday, they returned to their work and fought the fires, which were set by angry rioters.

The ethnic composition of the rioters on Monday was very different than subsequent days. Amongst Monday's rioters were not only Irish Catholics, who made up a large portion of the poorest immigrants (who are historically blamed for starting the draft riots) but also Protestant German immigrants. Also, those of German-American heritage made up a large

portion of the rioters on Monday.

The remaining days of riot entered into a new phase. This new phase was more violent and destructive than the first day. Rioters still continued to destroy the property of prominent Republicans. Also, attacks in the uptown districts centered on the hatred of the mob for law enforcement officials. This hatred could be seen clearly with the death of Colonel Henry O'Brien of the 11th New York Volunteers on Tuesday, July 14. On the prior day, Colonel O'Brien used a Howitzer cannon to remove rioters from Second Avenue. His actions resulted in the death of a woman bystander and child. Later that evening, Colonel O'Brien's home was ransacked. He was spotted early the next morning of July 14th. An unknown man clubbed him to the ground. The murder of Colonel O'Brien lasted several hours. Women beat his face beyond recognition

The crowd was so intent on the murder, that anyone who was in their way was the next victim. A local druggist attempted to give Colonel O'Brien a drink of water, but the group of rioters immediately turned on him and destroyed his store. People of any age would become their victim if they protested. A young girl protested the horrible treatment of Colonel O'Brien. She was beaten and her home destroyed.

Black individuals along with the Black community increasingly became the targets of white rioters during the remaining days of the riots. The most infamous of these attacks was upon the Colored Orphan Asylum. Black children and their teachers barely escaped the fire set by rioters before the entire orphanage was reduced to rubble. This event proves how the rioters saw Black people of all ages and gender as their enemy.

The first racial attack began Monday afternoon by Irish longshoremen who believed a "white's only" policy should be instituted along the piers. They firmly believed that the Blacks should be forced out of the entire industry and into other occupations. This policy was taken up by many of New York City's laborers such

as hacks, cart men, and pavers. Charles Jackson was just one of many Black victims of the mob consisting of Irish laborers. Jackson was severely beaten and almost drowned by "dock laborers."

The mob, made up of predominately industrious workers, focused their attack against Black males, but on occasion women were the targets. These women were trying to protect their husbands and sons from the wrath of the mob. The mob centered their attention not only on the Black people directly but also against any boardinghouse keepers who housed Black families. They burned their homes, demolished furniture, and threatened to hang any person seen as consorting with the city's Black population. The attacks on Black victims varied, some were beaten, drowned, or suffered physical dismemberment.

Many members of the riot often labeled people who were seen as enemies to their cause. You were labeled an enemy of the cause if you did not give the rioters what they wanted. Money for liquor, or funds to treat the poor were just some of the "needs" which required satisfactory completion for the cause. The mob was a mixed group of Irish and German laborers led by Adam Schlossheaur. They went around to Harlem storekeepers wanting them to give them money for liquor. A storekeeper, that failed to provide the adequate funds/payments necessary, name would be written on a card. The storekeeper would be taken care of later. This incident was repeated throughout the city.

Threats were replaced with action by rioters against many storekeepers that refused to pay. The angry rioters used clubs, revolvers, and set fire to establishments that did not meet the crowd's need.

The rioters also attacked the brothel district located along the West Side docks. Rioters destroyed these business establishments with hopes of removing these institutions from the area. The rioters did not harm the prostitutes who worked in these brothels.

Thursday, July 16th, was what many deemed as the last "huzzah" for a collective mob attack. The Seventh Avenue Armory, "the great symbol of Government Military presence in the uptown wards," was attacked. The armory had been heavily guarded. Late Thursday drew huge crowds into the city streets surrounding the arsenal. The Governor of New York, Horatio Seymour, learned of the attack on the arsenal and pleaded with N. Hill Fowler, a "Peace Democrat" to calm the rioters. Fowler succeeded in calming the angry band of rioters by reading the announcement that proclaimed the suspension of the draft in New York City. Fowler left, and the crowd dispersed peacefully.

The riot was finally quelled by regiments returning home from the Battle of Gettysburg, which had been fought just several days prior. The soldiers seized and occupied the streets and important factories in the uptown districts. The Seventh Regiment established peace along various strategic points, but a majority of the troops were located in the Uptown districts.

The arrival of the troops did not immediately stop the riots. The citizens attempted to do everything in their power to stop the soldiers. A few incidents were reported throughout the city, but life in New York City was slowly returning to normal. The widespread death and carnage that filled the streets of New York City throughout the week of July 13 ended.

The exact amount of property damage and the loss of life cannot be accurately determined since many of the rioters were brought to private homes and did not seek medical care at local hospitals. The final days of the riot saw 443 people arrested, 128 wounded, and over 50 people dead. It also saw more than 100 buildings burned down and about 200 others damaged from fire and looting. The property loss has been estimated to cost from \$1,500,000 to \$5,000,000.

The federal government did investigate the riots; however, it did not act upon any of its findings. The names and identities of the men

who started the riots were never disclosed to the public. It has been estimated that 50,000-70,000 men, women, and children participated in the riots. Of the 443 arrested, only 19 were convicted. The men and women who were convicted were not the ringleaders and received an average sentence of 5 years each in jail.

The New York City Draft riots were a horrific time in American history. The riots were a revolt against living conditions of urban residents. They occurred because of a combination of impoverished residents who were suffering economic hardship and inflation, along with built up resentment against the growing Black population, and the Republican Party. Rioters were not only just men, nor were they only of Irish heritage. They were a mix of the city's population who sought to get even with those who they viewed as the cause their impoverished lifestyles.

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